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JORGE LUIS BORGES: FICTION AND READING

The literary work of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges contains a unique conception of reality, a specific metaphysical outlook. The understanding of this perspective is integral to a full comprehension of his writing. In this short essay I will discuss a few salient aspects of the Borgesian world view largely as taken from some of his more important essays. The usual portrayal of Borges as a complete idealist is, I believe, inadequate. While idealism is undoubtedly a key component of his thought, his work would seem to present a markedly mediated utopia rather than a Platonic one. As a point of critical reference I will briefly treat the analysis of the French scholar Gérard Genette. Turning then to a brief examination of two short stories, I will demonstrate how Borges' philosophy finds a narrative voice. However, I do not wish to rigorously differentiate between genres within the body of Borges' prose works. Borges himself made little or no distinction between the essay and the short story, often placing real people into fictional tales and adding invented footnotes about works of nonexistent authors to pieces of legitimate criticism. This purposeful blurring of genre boundaries, emblematic of a larger confusion between fiction and reality, is evidenced in one of the works to which I will turn my attention, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," which has alternately been classified by editors and scholars as essay and short story. It is at this collusion of the invented and the real that our discussion must begin.

Borges maintained that philosophy and theology were really nothing more than branches of fantastic literature. Those systems of human thought that aspire to the highest forms of wisdom remain creations of fantasy. Following the idealism of Berkeley and Schopenhauer, two thinkers explicitly admired in his writing, Borges sees the world as a mental construct. Essentially, he sees it as a fiction. He proposes a model for this in his story, "Tlön, Ugbar, Orbis Tertius."¹ The work describes a fictional world created down to the smallest detail by a shadowy group of scholars. Their construct receives a mysterious legitimacy by its appearance in one copy of a pirated edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In his essay, "La postulación de la realidad,"² he describes four means by which reality can be understood: the romantic, and three variations of the classical. By romantic and classical Borges refers to two archetypal visions, the latter corresponding to an abundant confidence in the sufficiency of language and the former corresponding to a lack thereof. Classical faith in the signifying power of language is divided into three practices of writing: (1) the simple declaration of important events, (2) indirect reference to an imagined, larger, and more complex world, and (3) the total invention of circumstantial reality. Symbolically, these systems represent the development of the western tradition. According to Borges, such proposals, by their very plurality, demonstrate the absurdity of holding one view of reality to be more universally correct than the others. Thus he

undermines the notion of a solid foundation upon which ideas would be erected. World views are shown to be mere postulations. They are possible but cannot be true in any absolute sense. Within this atmosphere of uncertainty, he includes science, "Science is a finite sphere that grows in infinite space."³ The world in its totality is essentially unknowable; the real can only be postulated. If the vision of reality he presents is one of fiction, how then, is the latter conveyed?

The fundamental language of literature, according to Borges, is that of metaphor. Of metaphor he writes, "It is perhaps an error to suppose that metaphors can be invented. The true ones, those that formulate intimate connections between one image and another, have always existed."⁴ He later writes that while the number of metaphors is fixed, there exist an infinite number of variations and permutations of each.⁵ However, Borges seems to contradict his own presentation of a set of archetypal metaphors when he makes claims for the individual nature of art and fiction; "Art always opts for the individual, the concrete; art is not Platonic."⁶

Such an apparent clash is immediately rectified by an emphasis on interpretation. If there are innumerable variations of a single metaphor, it is easy to see that art achieves its stature of individuality through an election that is really a creative interpretation. The artist interprets or reads the possibility of tradition and engenders new forms that are variations on the eternal models. Thus the creative process is essentially a reading. This reading is then postulated; that is, it is encoded in language, written. The reader of this mediated postulation, the literary work, then becomes the final arbiter of meaning. The author posits and the reader interprets and creates. "The heroes of Shakespeare are independent of Shakespeare,"⁷ because their final significance resides in the one postulated by each individual reader. Literature, says Borges, exists apart from its authors.⁸ Nevertheless, an important writer exerts a great deal of influence on the way other writers are read. Furthermore, this interpretive pressure is not fixed temporally; one might say that García Márquez can shed light on Rabelais. Writes Borges, "a great writer creates his precursors. He creates them and in some way justifies them."⁹ Of course, this cannot be accomplished by the author alone. Whether he or she may propose new ways of seeing that facilitate a new understanding of an antecedent writer, this process must be completed by individual readers. Only through an act of interpretation can that which is postulated take on meaning.

The uncertainty inherent in a notion of the free play of possible realities and meanings has definite ramifications for a Borgesian causality. It would follow that logic itself is an invention and thus a mere possibility among many. In a good and interesting work of fiction, Borges declares, a magical causality replaces a psychological or rational one.¹⁰ It is precisely because the two latter claim to be real or true that he despises and finds them to be banal.¹¹ Hence, magic or fantastic relationships fill the space left by the impossibility of the

psychological and rational modes. The gap in understanding between text and reader is then filled by a certain verisimilitude required of the former and a kind of poetic faith¹² and imagination required of the latter.¹³ As we shall see in "Las ruinas circulares," Borges employs a religious metaphor to explain this more fully.

Another metaphor found in his writing is one that describes a cosmos. Beginning in the essay, "Del culto de los libros"¹⁴ and more fully realized in the story, "La biblioteca de Babel,"¹⁵ Borges posits a book as universe model.¹⁶ The book is described as a mythical object having a cult value. Letters and words achieve a mystical significance in the creation of the world. He then conjures an immense magical book that in mysterious way equals reality.¹⁷ It has an infinite number of variations and possible combinations. Also, it must be interpreted or read since it really is a book. Furthermore, it requires imagination and poetic faith on the part of the interpreter. This formulation also retains a singular nature in its dependence on the individual reader. In this way, Borges quite literally gives literary form to his particular world view. Reality is defined by literature rather than vice versa.¹⁸

In an article entitled, "La utopía literaria," the French critic, Gérard Genette, discusses the emphasis Borges places on reading in the construction of a coherent literary vision. According to Genette, not only is the book of the world representative of reality, it also embodies literature, including within itself every book ever written. Furthermore, the readers of such a text are themselves fictitious characters, part of the book. This Borgesian myth, says Genette, describes an imaginative utopia. It is a myth of literature that calls into question several assumptions of traditional positivist literary criticism; such as the link between text and author, chronologically ordered literary relations, and the immutability of literary meaning.

Literature, according to Borgesian utopia as described by Genette, is a self-sufficient system. Reality is its reflection, but the joint that links them remains invisible, mysterious. Autonomous and uncontaminated by reality, literature would seem to exist in a Platonic nether world. What Genette describes as the continual metamorphosis of literature would then appear to have insufficient impetus. Borges attempts to account for literary change in two ways: first, the universal book is described as infinite; and second, he makes individual readers the ultimate creators of literary meaning. However, these readers are themselves fictitious characters, defined by the literary system. Such a reader cannot provide the link between the literary and the real. How then, can such a closed, circular mechanism account for change? Without having recourse to a mutation of the romantic notion in proposing a genius of the reader, I think it possible to posit two kinds of reader-creators: a literary or imagined one, and an historical one. Thus, meaning is defined both by the reader's place within literature and by his or her insertion into history. Evidence for both is present in Borges' fiction.

I will now turn to two short stories that further exemplify the Borgesian vision, "Las ruinas circulares"¹⁹ and "Pierre Menard autor del Quijote."²⁰

The first of these is a rich tale that offers itself as a mythic or religious metaphor. It presents an interpretation of the creative process and hence, can be seen as a type of cosmology of cosmologies. In this sense it is about its own genesis. Further, it places man the creator in his place in the universe.

An atmosphere of myth and mystery that aspires to a certain unknown universalism seeps from its pages. The protagonist is a magician without name whom no one saw arrive. He is everyone. This universalism is captured on a thematic and stylistic plane by the phrase, "unánime noche," the ethereal origin of the magician. Ordinarily this would mean the English, "unanimous night." However, keeping in mind Borges' strict adherence to Latin etymologies, clearly a more universal linguistic approach than the colloquial, it most certainly signifies, "the night of the single soul" with "un-" referring to one or single, and "-ánime" referring to the soul or spirit. Mystery and totality are increased on the thematic level as well because while the single is the individual, the individual is universal, cosmically equated with all souls.

The religious motif is emphasized in such a way through the use of such phrases as "red Adam," "gnostic cosmologies," and "beginning with chaos," that it becomes evident that the story wants to be read as a creation myth. This is made obvious by the task the magician sets for himself: to dream a man and place him into reality. Not to be mistaken for just any cosmology, the story possesses a few salient features that relate directly to the Borgesian concepts discussed earlier. The sorcerer's creative power has as its source the "unknown aid" of a universal deity. As the magician begins dreaming of a number of students, possible candidates for reality, he realizes that only those who do not mimic his teachings, who demonstrate originality, are deserving of the status of individual. Then, when his first attempt fails, he begins again by dreaming of a beating heart. Thus he realizes that pedagogy based on rational principles is not sufficient for creation, that somehow one must go to the mystical center of things, the heart.

Of course, the notion of reality as a mental construction is wholly embodied in these themes. An additional complexity is added in a fatal twist at the story's climax. The magician, in passing through a wall of fire without being burned, realizes that he himself is a "mere simulation." He dreams a man into reality only to understand that even he himself is unreal, the dream of another. He is the invented reader-creator. His essence is defined by his place within a world of dreams, a system of fantasy. Implicitly, the story describes an infinite number of dreamers, infinite dream variations of reality, and infinite circular ruins. The circle motif, repeated throughout, gives us the symbolic key to this infinite cyclical causality of creation. In a sense, it also calls upon the linked literary relationship of the postulated and the interpreted, fiction and

reality. Just as the dreamer in dreaming realizes his unreal nature, so the inventor, in positing a possible reality, comprehends its fiction as well as his own.

Finally I will turn briefly to the second story. It is the incredible tale of Pierre Menard, a twentieth-century French writer, who dedicates himself to the task of rewriting Cervantes' Don Quijote so that his version will coincide perfectly with the original. He does this not by merely copying it nor by trying to be Cervantes, but by writing the book as if it were his own. And strangely enough, it is. Indeed, it is different, even better and infinitely richer than the work of Cervantes. Citing a passage from each, which are of course identical, the narrator tells us that they only appear to be the same, their respective meanings being quite different. Cervantes' passage is banal whiel that of Menard, showing the influence of William James and mitigated by several hundred years of history, has a profound, even shocking significance.

Obviously the key factor in an explanation of the difference between these two visually identical textual artifacts is history. Borges makes a convincing case for the complete context-dependent nature of meaning. Menard has not rewritten Don Quijote, but rather he has reread it for his own specific historical moment. The passage of time has given the work a different and deeper meaning in the twentieth century than it had in the sixteenth. The texts are different because Menard is a different reader of reality as are the readers of his Quijote. Menard's reading of literary tradition is dependent upon the temporal space he occupies; he is the historical reader-creator. He interprets, but time has changed the variation of possible realities. Thus, not only do different individuals postulate different realities, different epochs do as well. Meaning is not determined solely within the literary realm by fictional readers from archetypa metaphors.

Such a postulation allows Borges to account for change in the literary system, describe historical meaning, and escape a rigid idealism while at the same time permitting him to elude a strict chronology. Because the meaning of a literary work is dependent upon the historical context of its reception, the moment of its production lacks importance thus allowing us to posit different temporal relations between texts. What if, he writes at the close of the story, we were to reinterpret "the Odyssey as if it were posterior to the Aeneid...?" The flux of literary meaning and interpretation expands to infinity, only bound by the reader's subjectivity. As Menard realizes, "historical truth is not what has happened, it is what we judge to have happened."

In his writing, Jorge Luis Borges presents us with a fictional world. It happens that his fictional creation postulates that the world itself is a fictional creation. Life is defined by art and reality is defined by fiction. But, literature allows us to avoid the fall into solipsism, reading saves us from meaninglessness. Meaning develops from the twofold relation of the interpreter: to a literary dream world and to historical context. Through a series of postulations and

interpretations we are permitted to communicate with literary tradition, with history, and with ourselves. We read and we live.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1956).
- ² Borges, Discusión (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1957).
- ³ Borges, "Vindicación de Bouvard et Pécuchet," Discusión 141. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are my own translations from the Spanish original.
- ⁴ Borges, Otras Inquisiciones (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1960) 71. Note the tone of possibility; this is characteristic of his writing and certainly follows from the postulation premise.
- ⁵ In fact, he devotes an entire essay to this question in which he traces the history of a single metaphor. "La esfera de Pascal," Otras Inquisiciones.
- ⁶ Borges, "La poesía gauchesca," Discusión 13.
- ⁷ Borges, "La poesía gauchesca," Discusión 13.
- ⁸ Borges, "La flor de Coleridge," Otras Inquisiciones.
- ⁹ Borges, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Otras Inquisiciones.
- ¹⁰ Borges, prologue, La invención de Morel, by Adolfo Bioy Casares (Buenos Aires: Losada Editores, S.A., 1940).
- ¹¹ Borges devotes an entire essay to this theme, ("El arte narrativo y la magia," Discusión). It represents one of his major contributions to contemporary Latin American fiction.
- ¹² My literal translation from the Spanish, "fé poética," which is Borges' rendering of Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief."
- ¹³ Borges, "El arte narrativo y la magia," Discusión.
- ¹⁴ Borges, Otras Inquisiciones.
- ¹⁵ Borges, Ficciones.
- ¹⁶ Borges, immediate and acknowledged source for this topos is Emerson. Its roots are more ancient, to be found in the Kabbalah which he knew and studied.
- ¹⁷ This motif is also central to the story, "El jardín de los senderos que bifurcan." Ficciones.
- ¹⁸ Ricardo Piglia has examined Borges' cult of erudition which he sees as the ideological underpinning for such a view of literature. "Ideología y ficción en Borges," in Borges y la crítica (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1981).
- ¹⁹ Borges, Ficciones.
- ²⁰ Borges, Ficciones.